

MIAMI HERALD
22 February 1985

FILE ONLY

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 187

Around the Americas

Those bickering contras and their flying machines

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — The story began in Washington, with a defecting Nicaraguan ambassador who snatched \$660,000 from an embassy bank account and gave it to anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

It appeared to end last year in San Jose, with a document drafted in punctilious legalese to "divorce" Nicaraguan rebel leaders Eden Pastora and Alfonso Robelo and divvy up their jointly owned war materiel.

In between, it meandered through zany byways, including Pastora's purchase of an \$8,000 "ultralight" — a hang glider with a putt-putt motor — and a rebel pilot who made off with an \$85,000 helicopter in lieu of salary owed.

It is the story of the ragtag "air force" stitched together by Pastora and Robelo's Revolutionary Democratic Alliance to fight Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

The story is not over. Pastora is demanding the return of seven aircraft, which he says Robelo stole, before he agrees to discuss a proposal for uniting all anti-Sandinista factions.

"Nothing is resolved, and no one has given me an adequate explanation," Pastora said during a Miami visit this week. "I want the aircraft back as a demonstration of a new attitude — that we be treated with respect."

Defector's windfall

It was Dec. 19, 1982, when Francisco "Paco" Fiallos defected as the Sandinistas' ambassador to Washington; when he did, he apparently plundered a \$660,000 embassy bank account and gave the money to Pastora.

Pastora, a one-time Sandinista hero dismayed by his former comrades' Marxist sympathies, was planning an anti-Sandinista guerrilla war with Robelo. He decided to spend the Fiallos windfall on an air force to drop supplies to rebel fighters inside Nicaragua and stage daring raids against the Sandinistas.

Former and current aides say Pastora bought at least nine planes and three helicopters with the Fiallos loot and CIA funds received as part of the covert U.S. war on the Sandinistas.

The new air force's first publicized mission was Sept. 8, 1983, when a twin-engine Cessna 404 streaked over Managua's Augusto Cesar Sandino International Airport and dropped two 150-pound bombs jury-rigged under its belly.

The blasts did little damage, but the shock wave pitched the plane into the main terminal building, where it exploded, killing pilot Agustin Roman and bombardier Sebastian Mueller.

In Roman's wallet, investigators found the name and telephone

number of a CIA agent at the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica. U.S. journalists later discovered that the Washington firm of Investair — with strong links to the CIA — had handled the plane's export to Central America.

Next, in April 1984, an aging rebel C-47 — the military version of a DC-3 — crashed in northern Costa Rica during a supply flight that rebel sources said began in El Salvador. The crash killed all seven persons aboard, but the sources said rebels salvaged the supplies and burned the bodies before Costa Rican officials arrived.

In August, the rebels' twin-engine Cessna 310i, overloaded with guns and ammunition, suffered slight damage trying to take off from a dirt airstrip on a northern Costa Rican farm. Rather than fix the problem, said one rebel source, the farm's American owner panicked, cut up the plane with an acetylene torch and dumped the pieces in a nearby river.

A contra 'divorce'

Even before this last indignity, Pastora and Robelo were not getting along. Robelo, a former member of the Sandinista ruling junta, wanted the Democratic Alliance to join the Honduras-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force, but Pastora balked.

They split in July amid much acrimony, but on Sept. 5 they signed what is undoubtedly one of guerrilla warfare's most unusual documents — what Robelo only half-jokingly calls "an official divorce decree and separation of property."

"Robelo and Pastora agree to promise, definitely and irrevocably, to suspend all verbal attacks or aggressions by one against the other or by one organization against the other," said the document, provided by Robelo to The Miami Herald.

The settlement gave Pastora 558 mortar rounds, six mortar range finders, 323,200 rounds of 7.62mm automatic rifle ammunition, 600 emergency medical kits, six radio scanners and one single-sideband radio transmitter. He also received two twin-engine Beechcraft Baron

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airplanes and one Hughes 500 helicopter.

"Both signers also promise to investigate and attempt to return to Comandante Pastora two Hughes 500 helicopters taken by pilot Guillen (code name Boiton)," the document said. "This document notes the categorical assertion by . . . Robelo that neither he nor his political and military sectors had absolutely anything to do with the taking of those two helicopters. Comandante Pastora manifests that he accepts this affirmation insofar as the political sector is concerned."

'Stop whining'

Robelo claims the two helicopters in fact were one helicopter and one spare motor, taken by "pilot Guillen" in August 1984 because Pastora had failed to pay his salary for months. Robelo also says the settlement gave him everything not assigned to Pastora — four airplanes, not five, as Pastora claims. Pastora, Robelo suggests, should "stop all this whining."

Robelo said he gave one of his airplanes, another C-47, to the Democratic Force. Force President Adolfo Calero says he paid the \$65,000 that Pastora owed on the plane plus \$15,000 for a motor overhaul. He is not about to send it back.

Robelo won't say what happened to two of his other planes — a twin-engine Beechcraft Queenair and a single-engine craft he knows only as an "Icelander." He does, however, know about the last one, the slow-flying ultralight that Pastora bought in Miami in mid-1984.

Robelo said Pastora told him "we were going to win the war with that toy," and rebel sources said Pastora initially wanted to outfit it with a rocket pod, but it couldn't take off. Then, the sources said, he thought of using it to deliver mail and written orders to his camps around Nicaragua.

In fact, the ultralight never flew in the war zone, the sources said, and another pilot looking for back pay seized it and sold it to a Costa Rican flying enthusiast.

Two of Pastora's three aircraft, meanwhile, are gone. Pastora said the helicopter crashed in southern Nicaragua early this year, killing the pilot. Rebel spokesmen said the Beechcraft Baron, registration number N-666-PF, blew an engine and was ditched Feb. 3 in the Pacific Ocean, five miles off the Costa Rican Coast. The pilot was rescued.

That Baron, the rebels' first aircraft, was the pride of the fleet. Its number reminded the pilots where the money came from. It was known as the "666 Paco Fiallos."